BUILDING POSITIVE TEACHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

In early childhood settings, each moment that teachers and children interact with one another is an opportunity to develop positive relationships. It is important for teachers to use developmentally and individually appropriate strategies that take into consideration children's differing needs, interests, styles, and abilities. Research has suggested that teacher-child relationships play a significant role in influencing young children's social and emotional development. This review paper discusses why are positive teacher-child relationships important, what is the role of the teacher in developing positive teacher-child relationships and the key strategies teachers need to implement in order to build positive teacher-child relationships.

Key Words: Positive Teacher-Child Relationships, Early Childhood Settings, Key Strategies.

Introduction

Early teacher-child relationships lay the groundwork for creating supportive learning environments as children transition from preschool to elementary school and beyond. Understanding what these relationships look like for all students is crucial for promoting positive teacher-child interactions that have a significant impact on children's long-term success. As a teacher, we need to create a safe, caring, and supportive environment for children to feel valued, respected, and important. It is in this type of environment that teachers help children to learn about the world and their place in it. Children learn, grow, and thrive with close, positive relationships with their teachers that are nurtured and full of love, trust, and guidance.

Free play is a perfect opportunity to engage children in further learning. For example, if a child is building a tower with blocks the teacher could count all of the blocks in the tower with them.

Children can create a pattern out of the blocks, talk about colours and shapes. As a result, this keeps learning fun for the child and helps them to make connections to the real world.

Every moment is an opportunity for teachers to build and strengthen their relationships with children. Therefore, getting to know children; expressing empathy, comfort, and safety; having a positive attitude; setting expectations; encouraging and supporting children; and joining in free play are all key strategies for creating positive teacher-child relationships in school.

Teacher-child relationships are most commonly measured in terms of closeness and conflict. A child with a close relationship is likely to feel warmth and connectedness toward the teacher, and to see the classroom as a safe and affirming learning environment. A child who has a conflictual relationship is more likely to have strained interactions with the teacher and see the classroom as unsafe and unsupportive, fostering a negative perception of the classroom environment and adults in those spaces. The bond between individual children and their teacher is an important factor to consider in understanding the benefits of early childhood education. Evidence shows that young children's positive interactions with teachers strengthen all aspects of their development, including language, cognition and social-emotional skills, regardless of their age, gender, race, ethnic, language and income level. However, the quality of children's relationships with their teacher varies among individuals— even in the same classroom. Early teacher-child relationships are also linked to children's engagement in classroom instruction, which supports their learning. High-quality teacher-child relationships are associated with greater gains in academic, social-emotional and executive function outcomes (Essa and Burnham, 2001). Close teacher relationships are significantly related to positive school adjustment outcomes, such as school liking, behavioural engagement and vocabulary skills (Bodrova and Leong, 2012).Moreover, these early relationships may set the course for how a child views their relationships with future teachers.

Review of Literature

How children's development is shaped by Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) classrooms and especially by teacher–child interactions in those settings, has been researched for several decades.

Teacher–child interactions in ECEC classrooms, which are assumed to serve 'as the primary engines' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) of children's development, have been a focus of theoretical work and empirical research for several decades. To cite just a few prominent examples: theoretical thoughts on the importance of adults for the promotion of young children, which were introduced by the psychologist Lew SemjonowitschVygotski (1896–1934), have

been considered a crucial basis for the development of concepts such as 'scaffolding' (Berk and Winsler 1995; Bodrova and Leong 2012) and 'sustained shared thinking' (Purdon 2016; Siraj-Blatchford 2009). These concepts play a pivotal role with regard to the determination of developmentally appropriate high-quality teacher–child interactions in preschools and comparable settings (Bredekamp and Copple 2002; Winsler and Carlton 2003). In addition, theoretical approaches that rely on the domain specificity of children's knowledge acquisition (Carey and Spelke 1993; Wellman and Gelman 1998), as well as broader theory-based frameworks like the Process-, Person-, Context-, Time-Model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006; Essa and Burnham 2001), also provide an important basis for researchers to investigate the characteristics, predictivity, dependency and methodological issues of teacher–child interactions in ECEC classrooms.

Teachers' perceptions of their relationships with children typically are shaped by the level of conflict or close-ness—that is, the degree of discord or warmth within a relationship (Ladd and Burgess 1999; Pianta 1994; Pianta and Steinberg 1992). Similarly, children's perceptions revolve around the degree of emotional closeness and support, or negativity, within relationships with teachers (Bracken and Crain 1994; Ryan, Stiller, and Lynch 1994; Wentzel 1996). These perceptions of teacher-child relationships also appear to be consistent with observations of teachers and children interacting in the classroom (Howes et al. 1994; Pianta et al. 1997).Several studies support the idea that teacher beliefs, experiences, and expectations also contribute to the quality of teacher-child relationships (Pianta, Hamre, and Stuhlman 2003).

Children are more likely to be engaged in the classroom and motivated to learn when they trust that their teacher will provide comfort, encouragement and emotional support. Some teachers may provide more support and attention to children with whom they have a close and conflict-free relationship, which in turn, can deeply influence children's school readiness and adjustment.If the teacher-child relationship is perceived as unsupportive or negative, it may lead children to disengage from the enriching instruction happening in the classroom and reduce their interactions with others.

Research clearly indicates that the quality of teacher-child relationships is influenced by unique characteristics and previous relational experiences that both teachers and children bring to the classroom. Teacher-child relationships are frequently affected by children's behavioural problems, though there are some important gender differences.

What are positive teacher-child relationships?

In early childhood settings, each moment that teachers and children interact with one another is an opportunity to develop positive relationships. Teachers can use a variety of strategies to build positive relationships with children. Teacher behaviours such as listening to children, making eye contact with them, and engaging in many one-to-one, face-to-face interactions with young children promote secure teacher-child relationships. Talking to children using pleasant, calm voices and simple language, and greeting children warmly when they arrive in the classroom with their parents or from the buses help establish secure relationships between teachers and children.

It is important for teachers to use developmentally and individually appropriate strategies that take into consideration children's differing needs, interests, styles, and abilities. For example, with infants and toddlers, teachers respond to their cries or other signs of distress. Teachers let children know they care about them through warm, responsive, physical contact such as giving pats on the back, hugging, and holding young children in their laps. For preschool children, teachers encourage mutual respect between children and adults by waiting until children finish asking questions before answering them, and by encouraging children to listen when others speak. In addition, teachers' use of positive guidance techniques e.g., modelling and encouraging appropriate behaviour, redirecting children to more acceptable activities, setting clear limits also helps children develop trusting relationships with their teachers.

Why Are Positive Teacher-Child Relationships Important?

Research has suggested that teacher-child relationships play a significant role in influencing young children's social and emotional development. In studies of teacher-child relationships, children who had a secure relationship with their preschool and kindergarten teachers demonstrated good peer interactions and positive relationships with teachers and peers in elementary school. On the other hand, children who had insecure relationships with teachers had more difficulty interacting with peers and engaged in more conflict with their teachers. In addition, research has shown that teachers' interaction styles with children help children build positive and emotionally secure relationships with adults. For instance, teachers' smiling behaviours, affectionate words, and appropriate physical contact help promote children's positive responses toward teachers. Also, children whose teachers showed warmth and respect toward them (e.g., teachers who listened when children talked to them, made eye contact, treated children fairly) developed positive and competent peer relationships. Moreover, children who had secure relationships with their teachers demonstrated lower levels of challenging behaviours and higher levels of competence in school. Research on teacher-child relationships has been conducted with children from culturally diverse families in child care settings, university

preschools, family child care settings, Head Start programs, and kindergarten classrooms. Participants have included children from European American, African American, Hispanic, and Asian American families. However, no studies indicated whether children with disabilities were included. When developing relationships with young children, teachers should pay attention to the cultural, linguistic, and individual needs of the children. The importance of adapting strategies to meet the unique needs of the children and families in a teacher's care cannot be overstated.

Positive, trusting, and low-conflict relationships with teachers from preschool through high school are key contributors to children's adjustment to their social and academic environment. Hamre and Pianta (2003) report that teacher-child relationships in kindergarten are highly predictive of long-term educational outcomes (into middle school). Specifically, teacher-child conflict appears to be associated with negative feelings about school and school avoidance, lower levels of self-directedness and cooperation in the classroom, and poor academic outcomes (Birch and Ladd 1997). Additionally, teacher reports of relational conflict are related to increases in children's problem behaviours and decreases in competence behaviours over time (Pianta, Steinberg, and Rollins 1995).

Role of the teacher in developing positive teacher-child relationships

In developing positive teacher-child relationships, it is important to remember to:

- Engage in one-to-one interactions with children
- Get on the child's level for face-to-face interactions
- Use a pleasant, calm voice and simple language
- Provide warm, responsive physical contact
- Follow the child's lead and interest during play
- Help children understand classroom expectations
- Redirect children when they engage in challenging behaviour
- Listen to children and encourage them to listen to others
- Acknowledge children for their accomplishments and Effort

Key strategies teachers need to implement in order to build positive teacher-child relationships

1. Get to know each child individually

Don't just focus on getting through the academic material. Make a conscious effort to get to know each child – their interests and hobbies, things they do outside of school, who they look up to in their family, their pets, etc. Taking the time to talk to children about themselves instead of just academics goes a long way in building a strong relationship.

2. Express empathy, comfort, and safety

Help children to feel that you understand their thoughts, feelings, and emotions. As a result, this helps strengthen the bond between you (the teacher) and the child, reinforces trust, and helps the child feel safe and cared for. If a child becomes upset, comfort them by getting down on their level and giving them a hug or holding them, make eye contact, use simple language that is non-judgmental, and acknowledge what they are saying. Redirect the child's feelings to more positive ones i.e., discuss fun activities for the day and get the child's thoughts on what they'd like to do.

3. Have a positive attitude

It is very important for teachers to always have a positive attitude. Children look to you for examples on how they should behave and react in all situations. Therefore, having a positive attitude creates a positive classroom! Be aware of your attitude, mood, demeanour, and words to make sure you are remaining calm, positive,

4. Set expectations, encourage & support

Children perform and behave better when they have clear guidelines of what is expected of them. Set high standards for what you expect out of children with their schoolwork and behaviour. Explain it to them in words that they can easily understand. Pictures are a great way to show them too! In early education, children often need to be reminded of what is expected of them. You, as a teacher, need to support and encourage children to reach their goals. When they try their best, improve, and reach their goals, congratulate them, talk to them about what a great job they have done, and how you are proud of what they have achieved.

5. Join in activities and play

Joining in children's play is an essential part of developing a positive teacher-child relationship. When you join in children's free play, the child needs to initiate the play not the teacher. If a child is playing with the kitchen set, the teacher should ask the child what they would like them to play (mother/daughter, teach party, etc).

You can offer suggestions to the children to further their play. For example, if the child wants to have a picnic at the park, you could ask what food they are going to bring or how they are going to get there.

Conclusion

With a better understanding of how supportive teacher-child relationships relate to children's early learning success, along with the differences children experience in their relationships and the potential causes of those differences, teachers can take steps to ensure that all children are supported, including improving classroom practices, identifying gaps and strengths in teacher preparation programs, enhancing support for teachers through pre-service and in-service training on how to develop and maintain supportive relationships with students therefore we need to consider more dynamic, multi-level approaches to assessing classroom quality – considering both the overall quality of the classroom environment and individual children's experiences within that environment. More research and resources are needed to support teachers in how to build positive early relationships with children. Children's growth arises from authentic, trusting relationships with various people they encounter daily. Teaching through the lens of children's backgrounds and experiences deepens and extends learning.

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